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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ATHENS 000802

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SARKOZY WOWS ATHENS

Classified By: A/Political Counselor Jeff Hovenier for 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) With already established "rock star"-like status in Greece, French President Sarkozy's June 6 visit to Athens solidified Athens' perception of him as Greece's closest partner within the EU. Feted by the President, Prime Minister, and receiving the rare honor of speaking before the Greek Parliament, Sarkozy said -- from the Greek perspective -- all the right things:

-- Macedonia: Greece's position is legitimate and responsible, and Greece can count on French support.

-- Turkey: France supports a "special relationship" that falls short of EU membership; France understands that there are "conflicting feelings" within Greece on the issue.

-- Illegal Immigration: This will be a major focus of the French EU Presidency and more needs to be done.

-- French/Greek relations: Although historically good, there is a "New Greece-France Alliance."

¶2. (C) Greek officials responded warmly to Sarkozy's statements of the need for greater "significance to European defense and security policy." Sarkozy also pressed Athens to purchase French military equipment. Rumors abound -- and close contacts affirm -- that Sarkozy left with Greek commitment to purchase Rafale jets, and that Sarkozy made headway in selling French frigates. End Summary.

French President a "Rock Star"

¶3. (SBU) Sarkozy's highly anticipated visit appears to have exceeded Greek expectations. In meetings with PM Karamanlis, President Papoulias, and before the Greek Parliament, Sarkozy hit a home run with his message of a "New Greece - France Alliance," and in asserting France's "understanding and support" for key Greek positions, including Macedonia.

¶4. (U) Sarkozy's speech at the Greek Parliament -- a rare honor previously accorded to South African President Smuts (1946), President Eisenhower (1959), French President de Gaulle (1963), and President Bush (1991) -- was very favorably received. Key points in his nationally televised speech:

-- Macedonia: Greece's position is "legitimate and responsible." Sarkozy added "I want you to know that we chose Greece (on this issue) and will not change our stance." He later told reporters that Macedonia should accede to NATO and the EU but only "in good time" and "not before the name

dispute is resolved."

-- Turkey: France favors a "special relationship" that falls short of full EU membership for Turkey. Sarkozy said France understands Greece's sensitive position" on Turkey, adding he knows that there are "conflicting feelings" within Greek society on this issue.

-- Mediterranean Union: Greece has a leading role to play in developing the Mediterranean Union.

-- Illegal Immigration: This will be a major priority during the French EU Presidency, and Greece "cannot be left alone" to deal with the increasing number of illegal migrants. Following his meeting with PM Karamanlis, Sarkozy and Karamanlis both told reporters that they had discussed the possible creation of "a European Coast Guard," and agreed that France and Greece would do more to better guard the EU's maritime borders.

-- Cyprus: The "walls" in Nicosia should come down, and France seeks a fair and viable solution to the Cyprus problem.

-- French/Greek relations: Sarkozy referred to his own Greek roots, noting that his maternal grandfather "who lived in Thessaloniki would never have imagined that his grandson would come back to his homeland as President of France," and characterized the relationship as a "New Greece - France Alliance."

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Defense Sales

¶5. (SBU) During his meeting with PM Karamanlis, the two concluded a joint declaration for cooperation in defense and security (Note: We are following up with the French Embassy and Greek officials to get the text. End Note). In his various meetings, Sarkozy raised his long-standing commitment to enhancing European "defense and security policy," which received positive reactions from the Greeks.

¶6. (C) Rumors abound that Sarkozy also successfully pressed the Greeks to purchase French military equipment. Various sources have reported that PM Karamanlis agreed with Sarkozy that Greece would purchase French Rafale fighters to replace aging Mirages in the Greek Air Force. We have also heard rumors that Sarkozy made substantial headway in advancing the purchase of French FREMM frigates for the Greek Navy. We are following up with French Embassy and Greek officials for further details.

SPECKHARD